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Inside Jobs: Historical Conspiracies and their Effects on the Discipline of History

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories have been a captivating facet of American culture for decades, grasping at the tail end of any horrifying or momentous event in order to make sense of mind-boggling circumstances or loss of power. However, these theories seem to have grown intensely in popularity even in the last decade. Some credit this unprecedented growth to the internet and social media sites, and some even blame particular political leaders. But researchers, political scientists, psychologists, and historians have come to the same consensus: conspiracy theories have been gaining more traction among the public, to the point where these ideas cannot be written off or ignored. Now that this phenomenon has been established as a concern, the next issue to confront is why the masses are buying into these misconceptions, and how that is affecting important institutions such as the discipline of history. This thesis aims to analyze why people believe conspiracy theories, discuss some of the most deeply ingrained and relevant conspiracy theories in American culture, and to investigate how these are affecting the discipline of history in its approach and its legitimacy among the American people.

Conspiracy Theories and Their Appeal to the Masses

In order to address this topic fully, “conspiracy theory” and related terms must be defined. The definition and connotation surrounding these terms are sometimes murky and disputed, but some researchers have recently defined conspiracy theory as “a proposed explanation of events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of persons (the

conspirators), acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good."[1] They also define "conspiracy" as "a secret arrangement between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets, or illicitly cause widespread harm."[2] Essentially, conspiracy theories attempt to attribute complicated, frightening, and frustrating world events to a small group of people who are working behind the scenes, orchestrating the historical narrative in a mystifying manner.

Why *do* people believe in conspiracy theories? That is the million-dollar question among psychologists at the moment, because people do, in fact, believe in them. A 2017 poll discovered that over 60 percent of people—regardless of age, race, gender, educational level, or political preference—believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the JFK assassination[3] and a 2019 survey found that "45 percent of American adults have doubts about the safety of vaccinations."[4] While in previous decades those who adhere to conspiracy theories were labeled as crazy, uneducated fanatics on the fringes of society, it has become undeniable that this group is growing—and coming from all walks of life. Those who do not believe that Princess Diana is still alive or that lizards rule the world may wonder: how do others so easily accept these theories? And why are more and more people putting their confidence in these outlandish theories in our progressive and technology-based society? The answer is simple: simplicity. Rather than trying to wrestle with difficult questions or unclear enemies, "in stressful,

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[1] Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2016): 57-71, Accessed February 14, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/44018529.

[2] Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," 58.

[3] Harry Enten, "Most People Believe In JFK Conspiracy Theories." FiveThirtyEight, FiveThirtyEight, October 23, 2017, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies/.

[4] Joshua Pease, "How You've Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories," Popular Mechanics, December 17, 2019, https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/a30119985/why-people-believe-conspiracy-theories/.

ambivalent situations, the human brain is inclined toward simplicity." Individuals would rather choose an easy, conceptualized target.[5] For example, in the tragic case of 9/11, it is difficult and horrifying to confront the concerns that arise from the ability of a handful of terrorists to cause one of the worst atrocities in American history, such as the effectiveness of American foreign policy and the true level of safety provided by the American government. By claiming that 9/11 was an inside job,[6] theorists create a clear enemy, the State—and a clear form of action, which is to resist.[7] Another one of the biggest contributors to conspiracy theories is what psychologists have termed "proportionality bias," which is "the logical fallacy that believes the cause of an event should feel as important as its impact."[8] It is one of the root causes behind many of the most famous and widely spread conspiracy theories, such as the JFK assassination. People do not want to believe that the most powerful leader in the world was killed by a deranged man with a rifle. To many, it only makes sense that it would take the U.S. government's influence to take down a figure so important.[9] Proportionality bias is intensely hardwired in the human brain because we confront cause and effect every day. It is how we make sense of the world and the events that occur in it.[10] Essentially, it seems easier to produce alternative causes to events instead of investigating the true cause and what those conclusions may say about our society, institutions, and ourselves.

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[5] Pease, "How You've Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories."

[6] The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "inside job" as an act "done by or with the help of someone in a position within an organization or group." A term commonly used within conspiracy jargon, it most often refers to accusations surrounding national atrocities or acts of violence being orchestrated by members of the United States government (ex. 9/11, assassination of President John F. Kennedy, etc.). "Inside Job," In *Merriam-Webster*, n.d. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inside job.

[7] Pease, "How You've Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories."

[8] Pease, "How You've Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories."

[9] Pease, "How You've Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories."

[10] Pease, "How You've Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories."

The growing popularity of conspiracy theories has come to the attention of historians, psychologists, sociologists, and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation because it has begun to have tangible consequences. In the first half of 2019, there were more cases of the measles in the United States than had been since 1994. Many owe this to the growing incredulity of vaccinations among the public.[11] On May 30, 2019, the Phoenix home office of the FBI released a document which states "conspiracy theories 'very likely' inspire domestic terrorists to commit criminal and sometimes violent acts and 'very likely will emerge, spread and evolve' on internet platforms." It was the first document of its kind from the FBI to address conspiracy theories and their possible repercussions.[12] The FBI and other organizations have recently felt forced to address this phenomenon, not only because it is rapidly growing in popularity, but because it is producing palpable consequences also because of them. Acts of violence, such as synagogue shootings and hostage situations over supposed government-run-sex-trafficking-rings, are increasingly attributed to conspiracy theories and their massive presence in today's media.[13] The FBI anticipates a spike in conspiracy theories in the upcoming 2020 election, mostly due to political figures such as President Donald Trump.[14] With over 63 million Twitter followers, the president has one of the biggest social media followings among any contemporary political figures. In recent years, he has used his platform to help spread conspiracy theories and dissenting culture. He has tweeted "more than 100 times to voice doubts about the negative effects of climate change," has pushed the false narrative that former President Barack Obama was not born in the United States, and, most recently, "following Jeffrey Epstein's apparent

[11] Melissa Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say," Time, Time, August 15, 2019, https://time.com/5541411/conspiracy-theories-domestic-terrorism/.
[12] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."
[13] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."
[14] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."

suicide in federal jail, Trump retweeted an uncorroborated theory that suggested the death of the well-connected financier, who was charged with sex trafficking of minors and conspiracy, was suspicious and somehow linked to former President Bill Clinton."[15] Trump's motives for promoting these theories is not completely clear, but when recently confronted about whether he thinks these theories are true, he claimed he "had no idea."[16] Another instance of the power of social media to spread these theories is in the case of Ethan Lindenberger, an Ohio teenager who was vaccinated against his mother's wishes, and who revealed in a Senate hearing that his mother, who was a strong anti-vaccination advocate, mostly relied on Facebook for her information.[17] Social media has contributed greatly to the spread of conspiracy theories. While the internet has brought in a new age of information, not all of the information is accurate. Social media sites have given theorists and other individuals a platform to spread theories quickly and widely. Some are getting nervous about the unprecedented accessibility of theories and false information to the public that has been seen in recent years, including Mike Wood, a lecturer specializing in the psychology of conspiracy theories at Winchester University. Wood states that conspiracy theories " motivate people to take actions—to vote or to not vote, to vaccinate their kids or not to vaccinate their kids, to do all of these things that are important."[18] Because of this, certain social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have taken measures to ban high profile conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones, and to ban or mute content that would " promote or engage in violence or hate."[19]

[15] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."
[16] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."
[17] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."
[18] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."
[19] Chan, "Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say."

While many are attempting to fight against the power of conspiracies, experts warn against discrediting theorists' claims. Outright debunking of conspiracy theories tends to make the public even more inclined to believe them. Also, the complicated nature of conspiracy theories, in that most of them are not founded on facts at all, creates even more obstacles for those trying to disprove them.[20] It seems that the sustainability of conspiracy theories grows with each effort to dispel them.

Although conspiracy theorists come from all backgrounds, education levels, and political dispositions, researchers are discovering that certain factors can make one predisposed to believing in conspiracy theories. One of those factors is political predispositions. Researchers believe that "partisan identification drives conspiracy beliefs because of how it affects one's personal identity and fosters a sense of group belonging."[21] Research has shown that partisanship drives conspiratorial belief and can explain why those belonging to a certain political party are more likely to believe conspiracies about the opposing party, but also are more skeptical and less likely to adhere to conspiracies about those in their own party. For example, Democrats are more likely to believe that George W. Bush was behind 9/11, and Republicans are much more likely to believe that Barack Obama's United States birth certificate was forged.[22] However, it must be qualified that all points along the political spectrum are susceptible to conspiracy theories, including independents, but partisanship gives researchers insight as to why certain people believe specific conspiracies. Some researchers have proposed that some individuals have a predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking, just as some are predisposed to think a certain way

[20] Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," 59.
[21] Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," 59.
[22] Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," 59.

politically or ideologically.[23] During previous decades, and even to the present, there have existed certain preconceptions about those who accepted conspiracy theories, including those based upon race, political party, or social capital. However, the conspiracy boom that has occurred in the last few years, and the research conducted by various experts, has debunked almost all of them. It has proven that everyone is susceptible to conspiratorial thinking.

What makes conspiracy theories so dangerous is their potential damage to vital institutions of society. An editorial from the New York Times in October of 2012 verbalized some of these concerns:

> When desperation leads political critics of the president to discredit important nonpolitical institutions—including the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Federal Reserve, and the Congressional Budget Office—the damage can be long lasting. If voters come to distrust the most basic functions of government, the resulting cynicism can destroy the basic compact of citizenship.[24]

The doubt created by these conspiracies could have irrevocable damage to the fibers of the nation and of our society. However, little is known of what the consequences of this movement can be. Most studies and literature on the subject deal with the belief in conspiracy theories—their causes, demographic, etc.— and is invaluable in understanding why they have become such a phenomenon in contemporary culture. But few have studied about the consequences of them. This is partly because the movement is relatively new. Experts are just now seeing the manifestations of their theories and data. Some, however, are concerned that the broad

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[23] Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," 60.

[24] Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick, "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 3 (2015): 679-701, Accessed February 12, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/43653509., 680.

scholarship surrounding the subject is missing a vital point in the study, which is that "the propagation of conspiracy theories may undermine confidence in government in ways that extend far beyond the substance of the conspiracies."[25]

Major Historical Conspiracy Theories

JFK Assassination

One of the most infamous historical events clouded by conspiracy theories is the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. What about this horrendous event invited such widespread and unbridled scrutiny? It might be impossible to reveal a specific cause, but this assassination threatened the safety of Americans on a national scale. The fact that a lone gunman on a calm November day in Dallas was able to kill the President of the United States, one of the most powerful leaders in the world, was frightening and unsettling. President Lyndon B. Johnson would eventually put these doubts into words himself, questioning

> "if they had shot our president, driving down there, who would they shoot next? And what was going on in Washington? And when would the missiles be coming? I thought it was a conspiracy and I raised that question, and nearly everybody that was with me raised that question."[26]

Even Robert Kennedy, the same day his brother was shot, supposedly asked CIA Director John McCone, "Did you kill my brother?" With the top political leaders of the country doubting the circumstances surrounding the assassination, it comes as no surprise that the public shared their concerns. In the week immediately following JFK's death, social scientists conducted studies of

[25] Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick, "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories," 680.
[26] Peter Knight, "The Unofficial Version," In *The Kennedy Assassination*, 75-104, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, Accessed March 27, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r1x7h.10., 76.

the population to gain information on public opinion, and they found that only 29% of Americans believed that Lee Harvey Oswald was acting alone, with most individuals pinning some of the blame on several groups, including "Russians and Cubans abroad, and the far right and African Americans domestically."[27] This was fueled by the unprofessionalism and inaccuracy of the media in the days and weeks following the assassination, and the killing of Oswald by Jack Ruby. Many viewed this act as a way to keep Oswald from revealing information that certain groups did not want him to reveal.[28]

The main and initial source of conspiracy theories stemmed from Europe. In the United Kingdom, philosopher Bertrand Russell, inspired by work conducted by American lawyer Mark Lane, started the "Who Killed Kennedy Committee" with other authors, professors, and politicians. One of the first conspiracy books published was *Who Killed Kennedy?* by Thomas Buchanan in May 1964. Buchanan was an American expatriate residing in Paris. Along with Buchanan, Joachim Joesten also published one of the leading books on the assassination. His book, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy*, along with Buchanan's, asserted that Oswald did not work alone, and that the CIA most likely was involved to some degree.[29] American historian Richard Hofstadter, in a footnote in a published lecture on *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* delivered shortly before the Warren Commission Report was released, claimed that "conspiratorial interpretations of Kennedy's assassination have a far wider currency in Europe than they do in the United States."[30] Although Hofstadter asserts in his book that subscribing to political conspiracy theory was an American characteristic, he, and several other scholars of the

[27] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 76.
[28] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 76.
[29] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 77.
[30] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 78.

time, argued for the existence of an underlying fear in Europe surrounding political uprisings due to the prevalence in European tradition and history. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the Soviet Archives, however, evidence has emerged that Buchanan and Joesten could have unknowingly been part of an effort by the KGB to vilify the CIA and destabilize the United States. This information and possibility have given fuel to those who adhere to the belief that Communist groups were involved.[31]

In the next few years after the assassination, the number of theories became staggering, so much so that *Esquire* magazine published conspiracy primers in 1966 and 1967, each listing over 60 different theories.[32] However, most of these theories can be grouped into a few common themes. The most common is the theory that Oswald was not the only shooter. The supposed evidence legitimizing this theory for many comes form several sources, but specifically after the release of the famous Zapruder footage of the assassination and the scandal of Watergate, which deeply damaged the public's trust in the federal government. Initially, ten months after the Warren Commission was created, the commission came to the conclusion that Oswald worked alone, as had Jack Ruby.[33] And, at least for a short period of time, this statement put some of the doubt to rest. In the first few months following the Warren Commission's statement, journalists conducted surveys and published that 87% of the population believed the official version of events.[34] However, this honeymoon period would not last long.

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[31] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 78.
[32] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 79.
[33] Michael Miller, "JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories: The Grassy Knoll, Umbrella Man, LBJ and Ted Cruz's Dad," The Washington Post, WP Company, October 27, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/24/jfk-assassination-conspiracy-theories-the-grassy-knoll-umbrella-man-lbj-and-ted-cruzs-dad/.
[34] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 77.

In the years after the Warren Report was released, many critics found points to argue for the presence of multiple shooters. The first point was that several witnesses in and out of the Warren Report claimed to have seen figures hiding out in various places around the area and running away from the scene after several shots were fired. The second point was that in the Zapruder footage, Kennedy's head snapped back and left, indicating he was shot from the front right, and not from the rear, where the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald was found was located. Some have slowed the Zapruder footage frame by frame to reveal that Kennedy's head initially was propelled forward, then snapped back to the rear. Some believed this was evidence to support the claim of multiple shooters. To add to this, it was disclosed that the Warren Commission viewed the shot in photographs, but backward. J. Edgar Hoover later claimed it was "merely a 'printing error,'" making it seem more like a forward movement. Conspiracists also latched onto the press conference reports from Parkland Hospital, the hospital the President was taken to. These reports indicated Kennedy's throat wound was an entry rather than exit wound. Another major point that critics doubted was the Warren Commission's "single bullet theory,' also known as the "magic bullet theory." The Commission concluded that Oswald shot three times – one was the fatal head shot, one was a miss that ricocheted and injured a bystander, and the last caused the president's throat wound and also injured Texas Governor John Connally.[35] But some observers argued against this conclusion. First, both the FBI and the autopsy had concluded that the first shot had entered Kennedy's shoulder and remained there. Second, when looking at the autopsy and the footage, it is obvious that Kennedy and Connally's injuries do not align. Lastly, many pointed out Connally's delayed reaction in the Zapruder

[35] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 80.

footage. Connally himself "was adamant that he and Kennedy had been struck by different bullets, even though he remained a firm supporter of the Warren Commission."[36]

Figure 5.1 'Magic Bullet' (Commission Exhibit 399). Courtesy JFK Assassination Records Collection, NARA.[37]

After these accusations had been brewing for a few years, and after the scandal of Watergate, the House of Representatives voted in 1976 to establish a Select Committee on Assassinations to reinvestigate the killing of JFK, along with the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., in 1968.[38] The House investigation found no evidence of Russian, Cuban, or CIA involvement in Kennedy's assassination. However, the committee did conclude that "there was 'probably' a conspiracy involving a second gunman on the now infamous 'grassy knoll.'"[39] Even

[36] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 81.
[37] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 81.
[38] Miller, "JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories: The Grassy Knoll, Umbrella Man, LBJ and Ted Cruz's Dad."
[39] Miller, "JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories: The Grassy Knoll, Umbrella Man, LBJ and Ted Cruz's Dad."

though this claim would later be soundly refuted by experts and high tech recreations, as some scholars have claimed, the damage was already done, and the "great contradiction" allowed "room for conspiracy theories to grow."[40]

A substantial amount of conspiracy theories regarding the assassination involve Oswald himself. Many theorists speculate that Oswald had ties to the USSR and Cuba, and possibly the CIA. Soon after the assassination, photos began to circulate of Oswald holding a gun and extreme left-wing paraphernalia. Oswald also defected to Russia for a time, and many critics find it suspicious that Oswald could afford the $1,500 ticket when he reportedly only had $203 in his bank account. They also point out how easily Oswald came back to the United States. Some speculated that "he might have been turned into a Soviet spy, or that he was a US intelligence agent sent on a fake defection mission."[41] Critics were also perplexed by Oswald's friendship with George de Mohrenschildt, a wealthy Russian immigrant who had interesting ties with the CIA. There were also many questions surrounding Oswald's trip to Mexico City right before the assassination, and many suspected he met with Cuban officials or other Communists to form some sort of plan to take down the American government. The Warren Report produced photographs of Oswald supposedly entering the Soviet consulate, although many pointed out that the man in the photo has a completely different physical build than Oswald. Oswald also spent some time in New Orleans, in which he had affiliations with both pro and anti-Castro political groups. Critics also drew attention to the fact that the CIA apparently had no information on Oswald's whereabouts for two months while he was in New Orleans.[42] Although the CIA and FBI ruled out Communist involvement, many claim that the government purposefully allowed

[40] Miller, "JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories: The Grassy Knoll, Umbrella Man, LBJ and Ted Cruz's Dad."
[41] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 84.
[42] Knight, "The Unofficial Version," 84.

Oswald to conspire with Soviet and Cuban officials. Some even argue that the U.S. government, including the CIA and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, knew of Oswald's plot and allowed it to happen in order to oust Kennedy and appoint Johnson as President. Many base this assumption on a famous quote by Richard Nixon, in which he remarks "Lyndon and I both wanted to be President, the difference was I wouldn't kill for it."[43]

There are thousands of conspiracies and narratives that involve this infamous assassination, too many to be covered in this work. However, the point of these conspiracies, as with any conspiracy, is the underlying motivations of those who compose and spread them. These conspiracies grant a view into the human psyche, which is shaped by the culture and environment in which it exists. The JFK assassination occurred during the Cold War, when spies, intrigue, and treason were common aspects of Americans' vocabulary, so it should come as no surprise to some that the assassination of the country's leader would lead to unfounded accusations of the same kind. In many ways, the JFK assassination conspiracies would spark the conspiracy culture that exists in America today. It would bring conspiracies into the mainstream media and bring attention to ideas that had previously only existed on the fringes of political discourse. These theories would illustrate the power of dissent and suspicion and solidify a tradition of political conspiracy that would repeat for decades to come.

9/11 Terrorist Attacks

Unlike some of the other popular conspiracies, those surrounding the 9/11 attacks concern the lives of thousands of people. The atrocities committed on September 11, 2001, were

[43] Miller, "JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories: The Grassy Knoll, Umbrella Man, LBJ and Ted Cruz's Dad."

the worst terrorist attacks that America had ever seen. They caused mass hysteria and major political and foreign policy changes. After the smoke cleared and the rubble was removed, America would never be the same. These horrendous acts attacked more than just physical structures, they attacked Americans' sense of safety and trust. Consequently, conspiracy theories began emerging claiming various scenarios, including Bin Laden was never a legitimate threat to the United States, the World Trade Centers collapsed from controlled demolition, the Pentagon was struck by a missile, and that United Airlines Flight 93 was shot down. All of these theories include the overarching assumption that connected them all, that George W. Bush and the U.S. government were somehow involved in the attacks.[44]

Some argue that Bin Laden was never a threat and that "al Qaeda as an organization does not even exist." Some theorists claim that al Qaeda was never more than a guestbook. A Saudi dissident named Saas Al-Fagih, when interviewed by the TV magazine Frontline, explained that

> A recruitment office had been opened in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the 1980s for young Arabs who wanted to take part in the Afghan War. At first, no record was kept of those arriving at the office, but since more and more families were inquiring about the whereabouts of their sons, Bin Laden created a record of names and dates.[45]

Conspiracists also claim that the empty cave found in the mountains of Tora Bora in December 2001, the same cave that the U.S. government claimed held Bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders, further supports "the assumption that al Qaeda is only a phantom enemy."[46] However, if al Qaeda does not exist, who is Bin Laden? Conspiracists believe he may not be a terrorist at all,

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[44] Beáta Sáfrány , "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 19, no. 1 (2013): 11–30, www.jstor.org/stable/43487848., 11.
[45] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 11.
[46] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 12.

but some sort of decoy or scapegoat. They point to the tapes of Bin Laden that have been circulating since September of 2001. Qatar's al-Jazeera television station "has aired many video tapes featuring Bin Laden, some of which lead conspiracy theorists to questions the official version of the attacks since Bin Laden's appearance seems to them either un-Islamic or inconsistent." These videos show Bin Laden wearing rings and a wristwatch, which is forbidden for a man in the Islamic tradition. Theorists also point to two particular videos. The first, released a few days before the election in October 2004, features Bin Laden claiming responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. This occurred again in September 2007. Not only did it raise suspicions among some Americans regarding the consistent appearance immediately before elections, but these videos also raised questions because of their inconsistencies. Bin Laden appears much younger in the video from 2007 compared to 2004, with much less grey in his hair and beard and fewer wrinkles.[47]

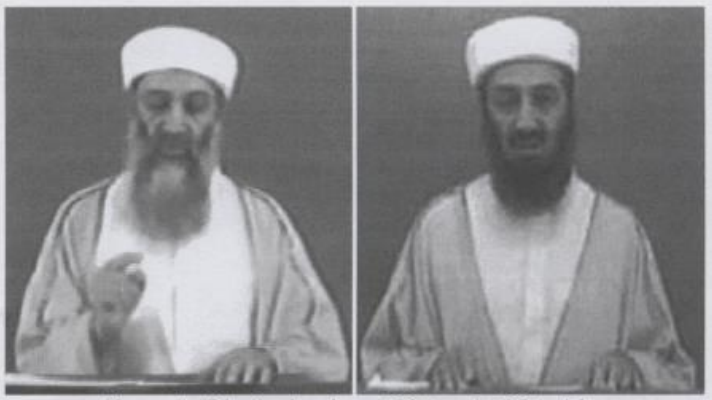


Figure 1: Bin Laden in a 2004 and 2007 video [48]

Theorists also claim that there were links between Bin Laden and the CIA, established during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan when the CIA supposedly funded and provided arms for Bin

[47] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 12.
[48] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 12.

Laden as a member of the anti-Soviet nationalists *mujaheddin*. They also claim that Bin Laden worked as a CIA agent under the name Tim Osman. In support of this theory, conspiracists point to an article published one month after the attacks "in the French newspaper Le Figaro, which claimed that in July 2001 Bin Laden had received medical attention for kidney failure at an American hospital in Dubai and was visited by a local CIA agent there." Theorists assert that if Bin Laden had been a threat, he would not have been allowed to leave Dubai. Obviously, many of these claims are not backed by hard evidence. Osama Bin Laden did in fact lead a terrorist group united by their hatred for America and inspired by the Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb, who "believed American society had been corrupted by liberalism."[49] The discrepancies among sources on the establishment of al Qaeda does not diminish the fact that a terrorist group existed. Whether it was known as al Qaeda or not is not vital in understanding its importance or involvement in terrorism. As would be expected, Bin Laden never had any known affiliation with the CIA and never worked with them. More and more evidence began to surface in order to refute these conspiracies, but the inconsistencies in some information was sufficient enough to plant doubt in the minds of some Americans, and would lead to the spread of even more theories, such as the theory surrounding the collapse of the World Trade Centers.[50]

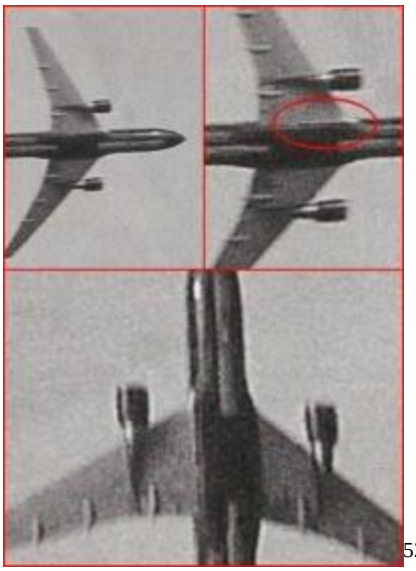
There are many factors that lead conspiracy theorists to argue that 9/11 was an inside job. One of the most discussed is the collapse of the World Trade Centers. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) reported in 2005 that "jet fuel fires and structural failure were responsible for the collapse of the buildings." However, theorists believe the source was controlled demolition. One of their primary arguments is that the temperature of jet fuel fires

[49] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 13.
[50] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 14.

(1800 degrees Fahrenheit) is well below the melting point of steel (2700 degrees Fahrenheit). Because of this, theorists conclude that the steel beams holding the buildings did not melt from the jet fuel of the aircraft, but from strategically placed bombs. Even certain members of academia have supported this claim, including Steven E. Jones, a professor of physics from Brigham Young University. Jones claims that the presence of white-yellow molten steel indicates the use of thermite, an explosive that burns much hotter than steel. Theorists also maintain that the presence of squibs, puffs of smoke ejecting from the sides of the building, further prove that thermite was in use because "such plumes of smoke are common when pre-positioned explosives are used."[51]

In order to explain this theory, conspiracists have had to identify the actual source of the World Trade Centers' collapse. They found an explanation in United Airlines Flight 175. Here, they would claim that explosives were attached to the bottom of the aircraft, citing supposed photographic proof of the underside of the plane immediately preceding impact.

[51] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 15.

 [52]

Theorists point to a shape in the photograph of the plane that they claimed was some sort of explosive.[53] Eventually, evidence would arise to refute these claims. Experts reveal that steel does not have to melt to compromise the integrity of the metal, which is exactly what occurred in the collapse of the Twin Towers. Steel loses 50% of its tensile strength at 600 degrees Celsius, which is substantially lower than the temperature of jet fuel fires. Also, squibs, or puffs of smoke, are possible during a collapse, not only during an explosion, Scientists point out that compressed air was forced to exit through windows in the form of squibs as the buildings collapsed.[54]

As Americans well know, the hijackers did not limit their attacks to the World Trade Centers, and neither do conspiracy theorists. Many theorists maintain that Flight 77, which struck the Pentagon, never actually hit the building. They argue that the holes in the side of the building are too small for the size of a commercial airliner. The wingspan of a Boeing 757, which was the

[52] Beáta Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 19, no. 1 (2013): 11–30. www.jstor.org/stable/43487848. Pg. 17.
[53] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 17.
[54] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 18.

particular aircraft of Flight 77, is 124 feet wide. The holes in the Pentagon only measure to 75 feet. Because of this information, some theorists have speculated that the Pentagon was hit by a missile.[55] Theorists also argue that if the aircraft had struck the Pentagon, there would be debris outside of the building, but none of the small pieces of wreckage found at the site could supposedly be identified as belonging to an American Airlines aircraft. Another major point in this argument involves Hani Hanjour, the hijacker of Flight 77. Like many of the other hijackers, Hanjour took flight lessons in the United States, but his teachers described him as a horrible pilot, and he never completed a single lesson. Conspiracy advocates claim that if Hanjour wanted to inflict the greatest amount of damage, he would have just nosedived the plane into the roof of the building. Instead, he "executed a maneuver described by experienced pilots as nearly impossible requiring professional expertise."[56] Theorists argue that no amateur pilot, let alone an extremely unskilled amateur, could have hit the buildings as precisely as Hanjour did, and that only a missile could have accomplished the type of damage inflicted.

Along with the attack on the Pentagon, conspiracy supporters also doubt the circumstances surrounding the hijacking and crash of Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. According to some theorists,

> the plane was shot down in order to mute the 9/11 conspiracy witnesses. Some theorists presume that the three passenger jets landed at an airport and substitute remote-control aircraft then attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The passengers from Flight 11, 175, as well as from Flight 77 were probably herded to United Airlines Flight 93 and then killed so that none of them could testify against the government.[57]

[55] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 19.
[56] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 21.
[57] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 21.

Conspiracists point to the phone calls made by the passengers from Flight 93, and claim that, given the technology available in 2001, it would be impossible to make phone calls at the altitude they were flying. A professor at Claremont School of Theology named David Ray Griffin, believes that it could have been possible to make calls in low flying planes, but not above 2,000 feet, making the calls made by the passengers impossible. Theorists also argue that the wreckage is suspicious and does not align with the story. Instead of finding bodies and large pieces of debris, responders found a large crater with little debris. Even eyewitnesses remarked at the state of the scene. Somerset County Coroner Wallace Miller "noticed how small the crater was and said it looked 'like someone took a scrap truck, dug a 10- foot ditch and dumped trash into it.'"[58]

There is ample amount of evidence to refute these claims. First, there were thousands of eyewitnesses around the Pentagon that day to see Flight 77 crash into it. Also, the wings were damaged and clipped before hitting the side of the building, hence the shortened wingspan. Contrary to previous claims, passengers aboard Flight 93 could make phone calls. Paul Guckian, vice president of engineering for cell phone maker Qualcomm, "told *Popular Mechanics* that phones could get a signal at an altitude around 30,000 or 35,000 feet but would lose that signal in the 50,000- foot range, 'Flight 93 never flew higher than 40,700 feet.'"[59]

As with many conspiracy theories, the accusations involving the attacks of 9/11 can easily be disproven by counter evidence. However, the existence of evidence does little to dissuade conspiracy theorists from believing them. They do not manifest from reality, but from fear and suspicion. Just like with any popular American conspiracy theory, the theories about

[58] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 22.
[59] Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories," 23-24.

September 11 all point to the U.S. government as the true perpetrator. The government killed civilians in order to mask "the truth." The government trained the hijackers. President Bush new of the attack beforehand and allowed it to happen in order to attack the Middle East and ensure the success of American oil companies. The list could continue endlessly. What makes the theories about 9/11 distinct is their scale. Americans had never seen atrocities of this level committed against them. For many, the idea that a few amateur pilots could murder almost 3,000 Americans, permanently alter the country's ideas of security, and send America into a war was impossible. The government had to be involved. And if the institution was capable of slaughtering thousands of its own citizens it was sworn to protect, what would it do next?

Area 51

The conspiracy theories regarding Area 51 are some of the oldest in the narrative, however, this mysterious military testing ground in Nevada has been the subject of attention in the news in recent months. In June 2019, Matty Roberts, a student from California, created an event on Facebook titled "Storm Area 51, They Can't Stop All of Us," with the date set at September 20.[60] The goal was set to "see them aliens," and quickly became a popular joke across social media, generating more than three million people registering their interest in the event. Some began to regard this strange movement as a threat to government security, believing that thousands of individuals could possibly attempt to enter Area 51. What would become of these people? How would the government handle this? Would the American public actually get a glimpse of some extraterrestrial secrets? In the end, many of these questions would not be

[60] Dakin Andone, "OK, but Seriously, What Really Goes on inside Area 51?" CNN, Cable News Network, September 21, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/21/us/area-51-inside-scn-trnd/index.html.

answered. On September 20, only around 75 enthusiasts came to Rachel, Nevada, outside of the gates. No one attempted to enter, and it seemed more of a party than any kind of protest or "storming," with music, food, and many participants dressed in alien costumes. No confrontations or acts of violence ensued, except for one man who was arrested for urinating on the gates around the entrance of Area 51.[61] Why did this tongue in cheek movement seemingly sweep the nation, and what is it about Area 51 that interests so many Americans?

The intrigue surrounding the military site begins in the late 1940s. In 1947, an alien spacecraft allegedly crashed outside of Roswell, New Mexico, with the bodies of the extra-terrestrials still inside. The U.S. government then proceeded to house the evidence inside Area 51 and kept the fact a secret from the American public. However, "the supposed UFO was actually smashed parts of balloons, sensors and radar reflectors from the wreckage of a classified government project meant to 'determine the state of Soviet nuclear weapons research,' according to a 1994 Air Force report."[62] Area 51 was intended as a military testing site. Initially under the jurisdiction of the CIA, it would eventually be passed to the Air Force in the 1970s. The crash in New Mexico did not become a national scandal or a large conspiracy, however, for many years. Area 51 did not become a household topic until 1989, when a man named Bob Lazar claimed he had worked as an engineer in Area 51 and had to reverse engineer what was supposedly a downed alien spacecraft.[63] His claims were never proven, his story, however, began to spread like wildfire, as many Americans were hearing of this secret military base for the first time. The facility had been a military secret, in order to hide information from the Soviets. The U.S.

[61] "Area 51: Storming of Secretive Nevada Base to 'See Aliens' Fails to Materialise," BBC News, BBC, September 20, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49774816.
[62] Andone, "OK, but Seriously, What Really Goes on inside Area 51?"
[63] Andone, "OK, but Seriously, What Really Goes on inside Area 51?"

government would not publicly acknowledge the existence of Area 51 until 2013, when the CIA published declassified documents confirming it was used as a test facility" for aerial surveillance technology.[64]

Lazar's claims stirred an already growing fire of skepticism surrounding the U.S. government and extraterrestrials. The sparks began in 1986, when George C. Andrews published *Extra-Terrestrials among Us*, in which he claimed extra-terrestrials had chosen an elite class of humans to control the masses and manipulate events on Earth. Andrews paints the CIA as functioning as a "government within a government," controlling every facet of American society and responsible for various acts, including the assassination of JFK. Andrews also argues the impending implementation of martial law in the U.S., and the establishment of a New World Order.[65] Andrews' claims would contribute to a period of UFO conspiracism from 1986-1989. During this time, much of the literature published involved some type of "secret governing apparatus" which was unknown and unaccountable. These claims were bolstered by the publication of what would be known as the MJ-12 Papers. These Papers were supposedly documents prepared for President Dwight D. Eisenhower, with a memo attached from President Harry Truman to his defense secretary, James Forrestal.[66] These Papers appear as a briefing document passed to Eisenhower from Truman,

> informing him of the existence of a super-secret group of the same name, allegedly established during the Truman administration, that consists of a dozen high military and scientific figures.

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[64] Andone, "OK, but Seriously, What Really Goes on inside Area 51?"
[65] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," In *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 80-98, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2013, Accessed March 14, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v.9., 89.
[66] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," 89.

> The documents describe crashes of UFOs and the recovery of their occupants' bodies, which established them as of indisputably extraterrestrial origin.[67]

According to lore, film producer Jaime Shandera received an anonymous package on December 11, 1984, from Albuquerque, New Mexico. The package contained an undeveloped roll of film. Shandera and UFO writer William Moore developed the film, which supposedly contained the MJ-12 Papers. Moore and Shandera would not make the papers public until June 1987, when they would be presented at a UFO conference in Washington, D.C.[68] Although several experts would disprove the documents' authenticity, the MJ-12 Papers would inspire countless critics and commentators to produce documentaries, books, and conventions surrounding the contents of the Papers. The MJ-12 documents sparked a turn in the conversation among UFO conspiracists. Instead of searching for general UFO existence, theorists began to assert that the government had been aware of extraterrestrial activity since the 1940s and had made great efforts to hide these facts from the public. Theorists argued that to accomplish this, "a secret bureaucracy had been created to study and control the situation."[69] The most famous conspiracy inspired by the MJ-12 Papers was the Lear Statement, a brief document published in 1989 by John Lear, in which he accuses the U.S. government of making deals with aliens and allowing these extraterrestrials to conduct experiments on humans in secret laboratories in Area 51. In exchange for space technology, the government would allow these extraterrestrials to participate in cattle mutilation (which had been a topic of wide discussion in the 1970s) and temporary abductions of Americans. The seven-page document had few citations and no primary evidence

[67] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," 90.
[68] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," 89.
[69] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," 90.

or documentation, but the accusations were nevertheless eye-catching and dizzying in their monumentality.[70]

These theories would continue to morph and grow into the present day, but the underlying accusations would stay consistent. At the heart of these theories is skepticism toward the government and suspicion towards its ability to withhold information. For many, the fact that the U.S. government would not publicly acknowledge the existence of Area 51, even though many Americans were aware of its existence, was alarming. In a poll for *Life* magazine, 1,546 adults were asked whether they believed in UFOs, and 43% of respondents answered yes, and 6% claimed to have seen one themselves.[71] Area 51 conspiracies specifically show the durability of conspiracy theories, and how internet culture create the perfect climate for the survival and growth of conspiracy theories. Millions were exposed to the Area 51 storming event and the conversations it created across social media. Even if a miniscule percentage of those exposed actually believed in the theory, they were still exposed and contributed to its notoriety.

Conspiracy Theories' Effect on the Discipline of History

Conspiracy theories, like any other powerful ideological movement, have had an impact on the discipline of history. As the legitimacy of history, along with government—funded institutions, comes under suspicion, it must adapt to the shifting environment. And, as these theories become catalysts for actual historical events, the scholarly discipline must adapt in order to efficiently study this phenomenon and survive. The concept of "security" and "conspiracy"

[70] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," 91.
[71] Barkun, Michael, "UFO Conspiracy Theories, 1975–1990," 82.

have not been confronted in historical study until very recently, and then only rarely. Even as these terms have not been widely discussed, even less so their relationship to each other in the context of history.

Conspiracy theories are a modern challenge. Evidence of the modern understanding of conspiracy theories cannot be found until the 16th century. This is attributed to three main causes: " a) a translocal public sphere, b) concepts, practices and means of institutionalized security production, and c) developed narratives that contain conspiracy theories only merges together from the Renaissance onwards."[72] Even though the concept of conspiracies has been present only since the Early Modern period, origins of the ideology can be traced to Ancient Greece. Comedians such as Aristophanes and their tales show how conspiratorial thinking was already commonplace in the oral culture of Athens. During the war between Athens and Sparta in 415, 411, and 404 B.C.E., "the threat of an internal Athenian conspiracy of oligarchs against the freedom of the city was openly discussed many times." Some historians have attempted to discover any truth behind these claims, and have come to no clear consensus, but the important point is that these ideas were being discussed. In these early Greek sources, the threat of conspiracy is directed "against 'the polis', 'freedom', the commonwealth or constitution—not against some equivalent to "'security.'"[73] What would become the Latin "securus," and would later morph into the modern interpretation of a sense of security, was limited in Greek to an interpersonal action. A person or action could pose a threat to an individual body, but no presumed sphere of security was compromised or considered. However, the term "conspiracy" or

[72] Cornel Zwierlein and Beatrice De Graaf. "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 38, no. 1 (143), 2013, pp. 7–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23644489., 7-8.
[73] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 10.

"conspiratio," would not enter the political discourse until the Wars of Religion in the 1560s and onwards. And by this time, the meaning of the word had shifted. Originally, in Latin, "conspiratio" had positive connotations, and essentially meant a collaboration, a consensus or "spiritual accord." But in the context of the 16th century, it would come to express "better the metaphysical (divine or Anti-Christ) element of these presumed collaborations of men and supernatural powers."[74] Security would also change during this period. Although it never contained religious meaning, as the emergence of the nation-state took precedence in Italy, "security" began to regard the government and empire as a whole.[75] Another significant change was the emergence of the public sphere as a separate entity. This ultimately grew from increased interstate communication during the Renaissance through written correspondence of various kinds. As Zwierlein and De Graaf point out, this is a vital aspect of the existence of conspiracy, when the general public can articulate and analyze freely those in power, or presumably so.[76] These terms would take another shift in the 18th century, most notably with the work *Histoire des conjurations, conspirations et révolutions célebres, tant anciennes que modernes* by French journalist Francois Joachim Duport Dutertre. For Dutertre, a conspiracy or "conjuration is always a complot of some men against the present government of a republic or a monarchy." He does not mention any transnational efforts, but rather describes a revolt-like plot caused by some group, headed by an "anti-hero" figure. In this 18th century definition, religion has no place. Under the shadow of the Enlightenment, the spiritual connotations of the 16th and 17th centuries had been labeled as "fanaticism," which, in effect, rendered as conspiracy any rebellion, plot, or coup against the established power.[77] There would be another shift in the 19th century; as the

[74] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 11-12.
[75] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 13.
[76] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 15.
[77] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 16-17.

post-revolutionary world emerged, new ideas of conspiracy and security would emerge with it. The 19th century

> was also characterized by a pluralization of structurally similar conspiracy threats. As well as the forms of anti-Jesuitism, anti-Semitism, and anti-anarchism, individual groupings, parties or groups were repeatedly identified as conspiracies by various sides, which reflects the new circumstance that the - ultimately bourgeois, although the aims were sometimes anti-bourgeois - system of associations, clubs and parties was constantly producing, in a completely new form, new actors who became the object of public attention.[78]

Now, the security threatened was the security of the state, or national society. This perception of conspiracy and security would solidify in the 1880s and 1890s, and continue into present day.

Some historians assert that the relationship between conspiracy and security developed in the late 19th century is the same in which people interact with today. Others, however, argue that a defining shift occurred either in 1945 or 1990. In 1945, the concept of social security that was introduced under the FDR administration redefined the relationship of the individual and the state. This would also usher in a new concept of "human security" manifested in humanitarian efforts by organizations such as the United Nations, largely in the 1990s. The UN Human Development Report defined human security as ""safety from the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime, and repression. It also means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of our daily lives - whether in our homes, in our jobs, in our communities or in our environment."[79]

[78] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 23.
[79] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 24.

All of this information is to illustrate the rich and extensive history that security and conspiracy have. Inevitably, they have influenced the historical narrative, but the historical discipline has left them relatively untouched. As early as 1955, Lucien Febvre of the Annales school proposed a type of security history, but it would eventually morph into mainly a study of the Reformation and Catholic confession and how this influenced individuals' perception of intellectual security. There would also emerge the studies of social and political security and national security policy, which would eventually be included in political science and other social sciences in the late 19th and early 20th century. It seems that the influence of the Cold War and the move away from international relations caused the social sciences and humanities to begin focusing internally.[80] Just as security history did not find a distinctive study of its own, neither did its opposite. Although conspiracy is a threat to security, it is but one of an endless list of threats. Conspiracy has not rendered its own branch of history, although more historians are attempting to tackle the topic, often leaving more questions than answers. Some trace the rise of conspiracy study to the influx of literature after 9/11, but Richard Hofstadter is more accurately attributed with initiating the conversation of conspiracy in American culture and paving the way for modern historians in the 1960s. In his work *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1963/4), Hofstadter connects the suspicions and conspiracies of anti-Catholicism and anti-Masonry in the 19th century to the frenzied anti-Communist political ideology of the Cold War era. He does not attempt to analyze these in their historical particulars, however, but as a supra-historical political style than can be applicable to all eras.[81]

[80] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 32-33.
[81] Zwierlein and De Graaf, "Security and Conspiracy in Modern History," 35.

In recent years, historians, and other social scientists, specifically psychologists, have begun to study conspiratorial behavior and the effects of exposure to conspiracy theories. With any level of historical research one can find that conspiracy theories are not confined to the modern era, but have in fact been present for thousands of years. As has been briefly discussed in this work, the United States specifically has a rich and problematic tradition of conspiracy theories. So, undoubtedly, many may wonder why these ideas are only recently being addressed, or, what distinguishes the conspiracies of the modern era or the culture surrounding them from those throughout the rest of history. These particular concerns may not be able to be sufficiently answered, but there are several hypotheses. One is the power of mass media. Unlike before, citizens have access to perceived evidence that previously would have been seen by a very limited number of people, or none at all. Rather than hearing of these perpetrators or mysterious events through rumor or print, conspiracists have access to videos of UFO landings and photographs of time travelers. The villains are vivid and widely known, not being limited by word of mouth.[82] Traitors have faces, deception can be watched in the comfort of your own home, and conspiracy is frozen in time. The technological advances of the last decade, moreover, have created an atmosphere that allows conspiracies to be spread wider and faster than ever before, causing a rapid growth in these behaviors associated with exposure to these theories, some of which historians and psychologists are not even aware of yet, nor of the extent of their consequences. While the dangers of conspiracy theories have been hypothesized for decades, not until recent years have researchers collected hard data to illustrate the concrete consequences of these theories. These studies have found that exposure to conspiratorial belief encourages distrust

[82] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 1996, 24.

of government and established institutions and lack of political participation.[83] Surveys in 2019 show that the public trust in government institutions to "do the right thing" is at a meager 17%, the lowest recorded since 1958, when data initially began being collected.[84] This type of thinking attacks the trust bestowed upon established institutions, including academia, further complicating their abilities to refute historically unsound claims, and thereby perpetuating a mysterious and dangerous cycle. The low opinion of established institutions, along with the disinterest in history, conceives a treacherous combination. Even as college enrollment has grown in recent years, the American Historical Association reported in 2018 that the history major declined more than any other major in the last six years, dropping to a total of 5.3 per 1,000 bachelor degrees awarded in 2017, compared to peaks of 11.8 in 1971 and 7.6 in 1993. The percentage of history majors currently in higher education is the lowest recorded since 1950.[85] This is not to argue that these numbers are in direct correlation with the popularity of conspiracy theories. Experts have commonly connected the decline with the economic recession of 2008, and that is most likely valid. What is important to understand is that these trends are occurring simultaneously, which could and has rendered disastrous results. If those entering the discipline continues to decline, there will be increasingly fewer historians available to tackle this phenomena, while the volume and influence of conspiracies steadily increases. Ultimately, what could possibly be one of the most dangerous threats to the discipline is the attack on history itself. As Hofstadter explains, it is not unwise to acknowledge the possibility of conspiratorial events in history. Historians and

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[83] Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick, "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 3 (2015): 679-701, Accessed February 12, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/43653509., 682.

[84] "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019," Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, January 4, 2020, https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/.

[85] "The History BA since the Great Recession," Perspectives on History, November 26, 2018, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report.

those who study the subject know that coups and secret societies did in fact exist. What distinguishes those who subscribe to the "paranoid style" of conspiracy theories from those who do not is the belief that "history *is* a conspiracy." It is not an occasionally recurring theme in the historical narrative, but for theorists, history is "set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade."[86] Whether the discipline of history will be sacrificed in these crusades is a revelation that will only be unveiled in time.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories have become an indisputable articulation of American culture, exemplifying not only the complexity of the human experience but the complexity of the American political tradition. Although these theories allow a unique glimpse into cultural tradition, they have not been extensively studied by historians. Quickly dismissed, conspiracy theories have been regarded as fringe thought, crazy delusions created by ignorant individuals not worth engaging with. Recently, however, historians have been giving theories another glance, and rightly so. Researchers have attributed the belief in conspiracy theories to political behavior, healthcare trends, and acts of violence. Due to technological developments, conspiracies are being spread faster and wider than ever before, causing more individuals to be exposed to conspiratorial thought and discourse. Psychologists have proven these trends to lead to a distrust of established institutions, including academia. History, as the official narrative of past events, is no exception. History programs in public universities and grade schools are

[86] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, 29.

funded by the government. In the eyes of conspiracy supporters, established academic programs are not to be trusted. It is the job of historians to understand these movements, not only to understand the current climate, but to ensure the survival of the discipline. If historians cannot adapt, study, and respond to these ideological accusations, they are not being true to their calling. Quickly dismissing these claims or ignoring them altogether does a disservice to the profession and its future. If history cannot be trusted by the public, how will it continue? What do these theories tell historians about the importance of sources and evidence? These are the questions that should be answered. Unfortunately, there has been a significant gap in the scholarship regarding the topic. The purpose of this work is to highlight themes surrounding the issue, emphasize the gaps in the existing scholarship, and begin a conversation that will hopefully inspire further research and contextualization by more qualified historians that will ensure the improvement and survival of the institution.

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